

I am pleased and proud to join today with my colleagues in introducing the Liberia Stabilization, Economic Empowerment, Development and Security Act -- the "Liberia SEEDS ACT" -- in the U.S. House of Representatives.

This bill provides vital, direct and targeted assistance to Liberia, sowing the SEEDS of a better and brighter future.

The Bible says that there is a time and a season for everything.

After so much death and despair and destruction, this is Liberia's season to "beat their swords into ploughshares"; the time for peace and democracy to take root.

With this legislation, we -- here in the United States -- roll up our sleeves and offer our hand in helping a staunch ally to recover and to rebuild. We hope to solidify our historic ties into a new partnership.

For more than a decade, Liberia suffered the deep wounds of bloody coups and civil wars. The seaside country was shattered, sinking into chaos and cruelty.

In the grip of a warlord's wrath, more than 200,000 Liberians died. 1.5 million -- about half of the population -- were displaced. Almost all of the country's infrastructure was destroyed. Liberia lay in ruins.

From the capital of Monrovia, Liberia's strongman stirred rebellion and exported evil to neighboring Sierra Leone. In a wretched trade, the region's hot diamonds helped to fund mass murder in cold blood.

In the civil wars that raged in both countries, tens of thousands of innocent civilians were killed.

Countless others had their arms, legs, and ears chopped off. Women were made into sex slaves, often gang-raped at gunpoint. Children were pressed into soldier's service, often brainwashed and drugged into killing their own parents. This was where terror reigned and horror prevailed -- a world turned upside down.

But, today, five years later, conditions in Liberia and the region have changed -- for the better. The long night's darkness is lifting.

Charles Taylor now sits in prison, standing trial in the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf now is the President of Liberia, winning a free and fair election in 2005 to become the first women elected to lead an African nation.

The Sirleaf Administration is moving with the determination and diligence and dispatch of a government that knows the hour's urgency.

It established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate human rights abuses and war crimes claims. It opened an aggressive probe to find and ferret out widespread public sector corruption. It persuaded international creditors, such as the International Monetary Fund, to cancel more than a billion dollars of debt, much of which was accumulated under previous, corrupt and repressive regimes.

While U.N. Peacekeepers continue to patrol Liberia's streets, former fighters have put down their guns. More than 100,000 refugees have returned home. Men and women are finding work and wages in upstart enterprises and restarted industries. Children are once again going to school, carrying books instead of guns. The steady rhythms of normal life are returning, slowly -- in some places.

But, real risks remain.

The window of opportunity to solidify and sustain the peace is open, but fragile -- and the clouds within view -- although distant -- still have the potential to gather and bring raging storms of conflict. In a documentary film about her first year in office, President Sirleaf stated that the

reemergence of strife "will always be a fear until we've done enough in responding to the needs of the population...."

So, this measure -- the Liberia SEEDS Act -- does what needs to be done in Liberia. It helps the government in responding to the needs of the population.

In a country with no running water and no electricity anywhere -- except from private generators -- the bill authorizes assistance to rebuild Liberia's fallen infrastructure. The Development Assistance (DA) funds will be used to reconstruct roads and bridges; to restore water and sanitation systems; and to rehabilitate the electricity grid to high-priority areas and institutions. The aid also supports efforts to retrain and employ former combatants and war-affected youth, enabling them to pick up tools to rebuild the country, rather than weapons to destroy it. After years of darkness and deprivation, this aid would allow Liberians to perform simple, but essential tasks that so many of us here take for granted -- to flick on a switch, to turn on the tap or to take to the road.

In a country accustomed to rampant, systemic corruption, the bill authorizes assistance to establish a new training institute for public-sector employees. The Economic Support Fund (ESF) will be used to enhance the Liberian government's capacity, transparency and operational effectiveness, making it more accountable, more responsive and more attractive to private and international investment. After years of tyranny and misery, this aid would help to restore the Liberian people's trust and confidence in their government as well as their future.

In a country wracked by chaos and conflict, the bill authorizes assistance to strengthen law and order. The International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds will be used to enhance the Liberian National Police Academy; to improve police operational capabilities; to provide vital police equipment and training; and to promote human rights and the rule of law. After years of criminal conspiracies and human atrocities, this aid would fortify the peace, promote justice, and accelerate change, progress and renewal in Liberia.

This bill makes a modest and prudent investment, authorizing \$225 million in bilateral aid to Liberia over five years, from fiscal year 2009 to 2013. It's a hand up -- not a hand out -- to an ally hurrying to her feet, reaching for the future.

Those who may blink at the bill's cost must instead consider its benefits. Perhaps, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf put it best. Addressing a joint session of Congress in March of 2006, President Sirleaf said this:

"What is the return on an investment that trains young combatants for life, rather than death? What is the yield when our young men can exchange their guns for jobs? What is the savings in food aid when our people can feed themselves again? What is the profit from educating our girls to be scientists and doctors? What is the dividend when our dependence ends, and we become true partners rather than supplicants?"

Here, we answer the call. We rise to the challenge. We respond to the needs.

This bill provides Liberia with seeds -- the seeds it needs for a lasting, durable peace...the seeds it needs for a stronger, more stable democracy...the seeds it needs for a fairer, more effective government...the seeds it needs for a more efficient, more productive market-driven economy...the seeds it needs for a better, brighter and more prosperous future.

So, we present the Liberia SEEDS Act, and urge our colleagues to join us in sponsoring and supporting the bill.

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